

Institute for Christian Teaching
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TEACHING MODERN LANGUAGES
FROM
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

by

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INTRODUCTION

In teaching modern languages the integration of faith and learning from a Christian perspective is very important. Looking at this subject rather superficially, one could conclude that there is little in common. We may think a language teacher should just take care of his students so that they learn the language as fast as possible by teaching grammar, phonetics, pronunciation, words, idioms, conversation and writing. However if we look closer, we shall notice that the integration of faith and learning a modern language can be achieved. In dealing with a broad view of teaching and learning modern languages from a Christian point of view, this paper includes some meth^{do}logical aspects which are also relevant to non-Christian teachers.

The paper divides the subject into the following four points and includes a typical Adventist contribution.

1. Language and its Theological Background
2. Language and Culture
3. The Importance of Teaching or Learning a Language from a Christian Point of View
4. The Christian Language Teacher

I. Language and its Theological Background

1. God is the founder of language

According to the account of the creation Adam came from the hand of his creator as an intelligent being, equipped with the capacity to communicate by means of a language and to exp^ond its use. Thus he was immediately able to understand God's speech concerning the trees in the Garden of Eden.(Gen.2:16,17) Adam had the capacity to name all the animals which JAHWE brought to him.(Gen.2:19) After the creation of Eve, Adam spoke the

marvelous words, which one could already consider as the first poetic communication.(1)

"This is now bone of my bones,
and flesh of my flesh: she shall
be called Woman, because she was
taken out of Man."

Language, this gift of God, served from the very beginning as a means of communication between God and man and among human beings. It was used as an element to express thoughts, requests, questions, emotions and to organise daily life.

2. Confusion of tongues ordered by God

From Genesis 11:6 we can conclude that a single common language existed until the destruction of the tower of Babel almost to the end of the second millenium after creation. According to the S.D.A. Bible Commentary, one language means literally "one lip and one kind of words", indicating "not only one language understood by all but the absence of differences in dialect as well. Pronunciation and vocabulary were the same among all men".(2)

God himself ordered the confusion of this one language. Genesis 11:4-6 gives us the following explanation:

1. The people were one.
2. There was only one language.
3. In order to stay together they built a large city with a huge tower.

These intensions and efforts of human beings had been interpreted as a violation of God's will expressed in Genesis 1:28 that man should "replenish the earth".

In order to take from man the uniting factor of "the one tongue", God brought upon them the confusion of tongues. The consequences of this action were that they left off to build the city and were scattered abroad. From then on there existed several peoples with their own languages. Henceforth, people have been experiencing separation because of the language problem.

Looking at this positively, the confusion of languages added something to the variety which already existed very strongly in God's creation. It made life for human beings somewhat richer. Unfortunately, in the course of history, the "confusion of tongues" sometimes became a factor of hatred between peoples and nations which was not in harmony with the will of God.

3. God's attitude concerning the learning and teaching of another language

Since God did not want only "one tongue" or "one language" on this earth, what might be His attitude towards the learning and teaching of other languages? Could it be interpreted as an action against the will of God, when man can again "understand one another's speech"?(Gen.11:7) Does it unite people in reconstructing the "tower of Babel" in a figurative sense in our time?

If we want to find an answer to these questions we should turn to the Holy Scripture. Here we do not find any hint that God forbade the learning and teaching of languages. God did not take this capacity from man. Moreover, language teaching does not intend to unite all existing languages. Efforts to use "Esperanto", invented by the Polish linguist Zamenhof, in 1887, as a common universal language, achieved far less than expectations. From the Bible we learn that Daniel, Paul and others spoke a number of languages.

To speak another language, even without having learned it, was considered in the early church as a gift from God. From reading the prophetic book of Revelation we may conclude that different languages will exist until the end of time, for men from all cultures and languages will be among the redeemed.(Rev. 7:9ff) Satan uses the teaching and learning of another language to tempt men and to unite their actions against the will of God. On the other hand, we need this capability for proclaiming the gospel preparing for the coming of our Lord.

II. Language and Culture

If we study language and culture we find that there exists a mutual influence. We can scarcely imagine any culture without language or some communication system such as signs, numbers, drawings, etc. Neither can we imagine a language without culture. Esperanto was not successful because there was no distinct culture supporting it. On the contrary people may have primitive religion or primitive art "but we know of no people that is not possessed of a fully developed language. The lowliest South African Bushman speaks in the form of a rich symbolic system that is in essence perfectly comparable to the speech of the most cultivated Frenchmen".(3)

L.R. Holmes adds:

"No languages are so impoverished or so limited in basic structural elements that they cannot be readily developed into highly sophisticated communications media simply by adding the necessary vocabulary. In fact, I am told that if these so-called primitive languages are inflectional in structure, they may have a capacity for expression which exceeds that of English".(4)

"When God said that this gospel of the kingdom should be preached to every creature, he saw to it that every human being would have the linguistic equipment needed to receive and comprehend the good news. The debased heathen may feel love and hate without words, but he must have the aid of language in order to conceptualize morale principles and understand the simplest abstraction about the unseen God."(5)

When we consider language as a gift of God, people have the responsibility to nurture and develop it. Otherwise, culture will be affected negatively.

Ernst Moritz Arndt, the German poet(1769-1860) came to following conclusion:

"That which confuses the language and displaces and troubles in any way its clear and pure flow, also has an influence of confusion, displacement and tarnishing of the whole people. For a people do not possess a more intellectual and more intimate element

than their language. If, therefore, a people will not lose that which makes it a people; if it will preserve its nature with all its peculiarities, it must especially beware that its language does not become spoiled or destroyed." (6, Translated by writer)

This could happen, if a language group prefers to include in its own language an increasing number of foreign words.

Since we can only think in the medium of a language, it may be used for good or for evil. It may serve to utter words of gossip or to communicate sinful thoughts. Although language is partially corrupted by words invented by sinful men, we can use words to express elevated thoughts, to communicate high and noble feelings between human beings and between man and God. With our tongue "we bless God, ... and therewith we curse men".(James 3:9) It shows something about the tremendous power of words. This power is used by evangelists or statesmen to draw people and nations under their influence. Since language can be used in a positive and in a negative way, it also influences culture positively or negatively, to build up or to destroy.

Our culture has an effect on our behaviour, the way we talk and write. Man thinks and speaks with the aid of language which is a product or a reflexion of culture. In this connection our world view is very important, for "language reflects world view, and world view shapes language"(7). Here too we have this mutual influence. That means, if faith determines our world view it will have a positive Christian effect on our language and culture.

The following are some examples to show that "language reflects a culture"(8). For instance, the German word for the day of the week "Donnerstag"(Thursday) tells us that the German people once believed in "Donar", the god of thunder. Also the German word "gemuetlich" which means "cosy", is not easily translated into the French language. The two French words "agreable" and "intime" taken together explain the German word. This also illustrates the German nature of language and culture. This requires a translator or language teacher to have

experienced the culture of a country to understand the real meaning of the words in that culture.

The grammatical structure and pronunciation of words also reflect culture or cultural heritage. German, for instance, pays attention in its pronunciation to every syllable and letter. This may be attributed to the experience of the people in its early cultural development which put emphasis on exactness, precision and accuracy. On the other hand we look at the beautiful, sonorous and smooth French language where syllables or letters are clipped, which some philologists or linguists consider as a functional pronunciation. Could it be that French people prefer the beautiful to exactness? Here are two peoples with two cultural backgrounds, reflecting very different language styles. As the world of culture is a world of values(9), the language itself is full of positive and negative values. One word may have a different meaning to Christians or non-Christians. A.F. Holmes mentions in this connection the word "love". He writes:

"The word "love" is used promiscuously today, but it means something different in a Christian context than in pop psychology and most popular lyrics."(10)

One of the aspects of culture is literature. It influences culture in a positive or negative sense. When Niebuhr writes: "There is no phase of human culture over which Christ does not rule, and no human work which is not subject to his transforming power ..." (11), literature is included as well. Here, as we shall see later, the language teacher must give special attention.

III. The Importance of Teaching or Learning a Language from a Christian Point of View

1. Getting acquainted with another culture

To learn another language means to get acquainted with another culture. It helps to understand different peoples, different cultures - their positive and negative values. How can someone preach the gospel effectively to another people if he does not understand their culture, their way of thinking, their history, their problems, their customs, their way of living? Our understanding of another people, another culture, another

language may not be perfect. It will always be relative. Nevertheless, it contributes to helping different people and nations understand one another. It is better, when diverse peoples communicate and work together instead of engaging in strife or misunderstanding. Thus, to learn a language as a means of communication helps to establish peace. This aspect should not be underestimated.

2. Becoming more tolerant

To learn another language makes people more tolerant towards the language itself. However, tolerance towards peoples, their habits, their ideals and religion is even much more important. It might even produce a sense of charity. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "unto the Jew I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews, ... to them that are without law, as without law ... that I might gain them that are without law"(1. Cor.9:20,21), meaning that for the Jew I am a Jew, for the Greek I am a Greek, he informs his readers about his comprehension of people and his tolerant attitude towards them. To know another people's language could certainly help someone say that for the French I am French, for the Americans I am American, for the Italians I am Italian, for the Germans I am German etc. The apostle Paul would add "in order to gain them for Christ". There are people, while learning another language, who were inspired, to go as missionaries to another country.

IV. The Christian Language Teacher

1. His behaviour

The Christian language teacher would certainly consider how Jesus would teach a language, how He would react and evaluate, how He would transmit knowledge and how He would relate to His students. It is very important to ask these questions frequently. Maybe Jesus would have avoided the stereotyped classroom. Instead He would have communicated with His students in an informal and creative way. Also, He would have been conscious of His evangelistic and "pastoral responsibility"(12). He would first seek the glory of God.(13)

If the word of God is the teacher's guide, his desire would be to act as a servant of God.(14) He will see in his work, as Gaebelein points out, an "evangelistic challenge of the institution for unbelievers"(15). "If Jesus Christ is to be the Lord of all" teaching and learning, including the learning of languages, will "be penetrated with Christian perspectives".(16)

This does not necessarily mean that in each lesson there should be Bible quotations or religious phrases. This could have a rather ridiculous and negative effect. It means that the entire attitude, the way of behaviour, the way of treating students and subjects should be done with a Christian attitude and from a Christian standpoint. Thus the Word of God remains, nevertheless, the integrating factor and the teacher remains "within the pattern of God's truth"(17).

In other words, the Christian language teacher has the "love for the truth"(18), but "does not need to keep looking for the integrating factor"(19). Out of his nature, as a new-born creature, he will act according to his understanding of the Holy Scripture. He interprets "culture through Christ"(20). He teaches Christian ethics "for the improvement of life"(21). He helps students to get or to keep the Christian dimension of life. Thus a Christian language teacher transmits his faith to his students by his attitude, his approach, his conversations and his actions.

According to biblical principles, the Christian language teacher treats his students with love, sympathy and justice.(22) Human beings may inadvertently err in being just. His intentions, however, in evaluation and grading procedures will be based on student achievement and fairness. Every student is an individual and very important.(23) The teacher's "faith liberates rather than enslaves the mind"(24), his own and that of others.

2. His qualification

In order to match the challenge and demands of our time, the Christian language teacher should be knowledgeable and current concerning the requirements for each class-level. He must ask himself if he is fulfilling the required objectives. He is always looking for new methods and current language changes. The text

books he uses must be up to date as well. School directors should seek to send the language teacher periodically to the country whose language he is teaching so that his knowledge remains thoroughly up to date.

It is self-evident that he will know the political, historical and social development of that country. That means he should engage in and take time for personal studies. An overloaded language teacher will not have enough time and energy to work effectively.

3. His objectives

Certainly a Christian language teacher has additional objectives compared to a non-Christian teacher. For him it is important that his students find and remain in the way of eternal life. Thus he is also interested in the development of his students' character. He will teach them the moral and ethical values and demands of society from a Christian standpoint. In order for students to get a realistic world view, he develops in his students the capacity to think for themselves, to judge and to evaluate judgements. The language teacher is in a favoured position to help his students to appreciate and comprehend different peoples and nations.

We do not have a Christian language, but the language teacher shows the difference between language that is slang and language that is refined. He encourages his students to avoid expressions which blaspheme God or hurt people.

Apart from this religious and ethical aspect the Christian language teacher has to follow the state requirements of which each student should be informed at the beginning of the school year. Thus the teacher will be eager to communicate the knowledge the student needs to pass the qualifying examinations and to write and converse on a high level.

4. His methods

What are the best methods in order to reach all these objectives? The teacher will help students use efficient and effective study methods. How to distinguish between the main and

minor points should be included. The teacher must always attempt to reach the best possible results in his students. Therefore he must set his standard so that most of the students in the class are able to achieve the set goals.

As every merchant praises his merchandise so a language teacher will show a certain enthusiasm for the language he is teaching in order to encourage students to go ahead in their studies. He will convey to them why it is important to learn the language and will inspire responsibility and love for learning(25) it. Those who have clear and definite goals learn more easily.

To motivate students in learning a language the following supporting rationale can be used by the language teacher. Students receive professional advantages in the European Common Market. There are advantages in communication and understanding other peoples, and the contribution one makes to the cooperations between nations. Somebody who visits another country and does not speak the language could easily be threatened because of the strange environment. To know a language makes people feel at home. Learning other languages is important to the modern man who travels.

The audio-visual method can have a positive effect. The student becomes acquainted with varying voices and accents. Currently efforts are made to teach modern languages with computers. This too can be very helpful. There is a danger, however, concerning possible negative effects on student-teacher contact.

In order to keep students learning and to show them their progress, regular oral and written quizzes as well as examinations are needed.

For effective work in class, careful consideration should be given to grouping. To give each student enough attention and many opportunities to speak, the language class groups should be kept at appropriate size. The school program should include plans for at least one-week language trip to another country or something of a similar experience. This serves as a stimulating

factor and students are able to collect travel experiences which broaden them.

Appropriate teaching content materials and procedures must be chosen in a progressive advancement in difficulty and challenge. This will lead to interesting class discussions on many current topics.

Appropriate portions of literature could easily be used to integrate faith, because they touch human behaviour, human faith, ethical and moral standards and the philosophy of life. The teacher will show the difference between such philosophies as realism and idealism, between a world of dreams and reality. He will inform his students about the different ideologies which exist, and where man has diverted from the rules of God. In discussions, conversations, interviews, exchanges of experiences he tries to broaden the students understanding and vocabulary. Discussions will contribute to understanding the world in which we live. In reading "secular literature" we shall be confronted with a sinful world, but we must not be of this world by taking on worldly behaviour. The Bible itself is a "book of literature". It also depicts good and evil. This does not mean that the Bible is on the same level as other literature. It remains as Gaebelein points out "literature of power" because it can change a human person. (26) The Christian language teacher will use the biblical ethical standard to judge all works of literature. He will encourage students to read modern versions of the Bible. The teacher should not be afraid to clearly present his view of the world and be open to challenge. (27) If the teacher's world view is very well founded in the word of God, even non-Christian students will respect his way of seeing things. It will lead students to a positive criticism of literature. It will encourage them to develop correct "judgement and insight" (28).

Topics for class discussions could be: power, love, the true values of man, psychological, sociological, educational, ethical problems, how to work for the common good of the community to which one belongs. One could discuss theological and philosophical statements, communism, racism, nationalism etc. This

means a Christian language teacher has many possibilities, especially in the advanced classes for "the transmission of ideas and values"(29), and to sharpen intellect. In discussing the past and the present with a critical attitude the love for truth will always predominate.(30)

In giving students the opportunity for frank discussions they will develop their own opinions. Holmes points out:

"Adolescents need frank discussion and patient guidance rather than restrictions whose unexplained or inconsistent inflexibility incites reactions and builds negative temperaments.

To repress student freedom of thought and expression is like brainwashing; they should rather be inspired to channel their freedom into constructive Christian thought and action."(31)

"College is a place to think, to raise questions and doubts and discuss them openly and the Christian college must encourage students to do so in dialog with more mature minds, and to confront the best informations and arguments available."(32)

It is certainly a sign of maturity in a school, where different notions, interpretations are carried out in a tolerant spirit, where people inspite of their difference of opinions are united in love. The teacher has a very important task to help students to acquire this maturity.

5. Adventist contribution

Would an Adventist language teacher be different than any other sincere Christian language teacher? Both could begin the first class in the morning with a Bible text in the language to study and/or with a prayer. Both would transmit Biblical ethics to their students. Both would tell about their faith in Jesus Christ. However, in addition, the Adventist language teacher would discuss distinct Adventist teachings such as the Sabbath, the belief in creation, health principles, signs of the times, etc. He would invite his students to attend the Sabbath school in a class whose language they are studying. A teacher in German could show, for instance, that Samstag(Saturday) is the 7th day of the week because "Mittwoch"(Wednesday) means "Mitte der Woche"(the middle of the week).

CONCLUSION

Putting everything in a nutshell a Christian language teacher has a very important task to fulfill. He has a lot of opportunities to integrate faith in learning a language and to transmit to his students a Christian world view. He can show them where and how to find a new dimension of life, and how life in a sinful world can be worthwhile and happy.

NOTES

1. Compare V. Negreli and J.I. Miguel, p.10.
2. S.D.A. Bible Commentary, p.283.
3. L.R. Holmes, p.20.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. L. Reiner, p.1 (Was die Sprache verwirrt und verrueckt und auf irgendeine Weise den klaren und lauterer Fluss truebt, das hat auch den Einfluss der Verwirrung, Verrueckung und Truebung des ganzen Volkes. Denn ein geistigeres und innigeres Element als die Sprache hat ein Volk nicht. Will also ein Volk nicht verlieren, wodurch es Volk ist, will es seine Art mit allen Eigentuemlichkeiten bewahren, so hat es auf nichts so sehr zu wachen, als dass ihm seine Sprache nicht verdorben und zerstoert werde.)
7. B.J. Walsh and J.R. Middleton, p.34.
8. Ibid.
9. H.R.Niebuhr, p.34.
10. A.F. Holmes, p.51.
11. H.R.Niebuhr, p.227.
12. B.J. Walsh and J.R. Middleton, p.166; F.E. Gaebelin, p.6.
13. F.E. Gaebelin, p.53.
14. B.J. Walsh and J.R. Middleton, p.59; A.F. Holmes, p.64.
15. F.E. Gaebelin, p.95.
16. A.F. Holmes, p.22.
17. F.E. Gaebelin, p.21.
18. A.F. Holmes, p.69.
19. F.E. Gaebelin, p.11.
20. H.R. Niebuhr, p.83.
21. Id., p.90.
22. Comp. A.F. Holmes, p.52; E.G. White, p.280.
23. F.E. Gaebelin, p.93.
24. A.F. Holmes, p.63.
25. Id., pp.81.82.
26. F.E. Gaebelin, p.66.
27. B.J. Walsh and J.R. Middleton, p.185.

28. H. Heie and D.L. Wolfe, p.339.

29. A.F. Holmes, pp.61,62.

30. A.F. Holmes, p.69.

31. Id., p.71.

32. Id., p.74.

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APPENDIX

A German sample lesson

An approach to integrate faith and learning can be shown in a lesson using the following German poem, written by Albrecht Goes (born in 1908). Although the rhyme is lost in English, the content is, in this connection, more important. A similar approach was used in a lecture given by Orville Woolford, "Teaching, the Basic Science, from a Christian Perspective", held on July 21, 1989 on the occasion of the Faith and Learning Seminar at Collonges-sous-Salève, France.

Die Schritte

1. Klein ist, mein Kind dein erster Schritt,
Klein wird dein letzter sein.
Den ersten gehn Vater und Mutter mit,
Den letzten gehst du allein.
2. Sei's um ein Jahr, dann gehst du, Kind,
Viel Schritte unbewacht.
Wer weiss, was das dann für Schritte sind
Im Licht und in der Nacht?
3. Geh kühnen Schritt, tu tapfren Tritt,
Gross ist die Welt und dein.
Wir werden, mein Kind, nach dem letzten Schritt
Wieder beisammen sein.

A literal Translation:

The steps

1. My child, your first step is small,
So also will your last one be.
Father and mother go with you the first one;
The last one you will go alone.
2. Child, perhaps already one year later,
You will take many steps unwatched.
Who knows, what kind of steps you will take
In the light and during the night?
3. Take a bold step, make a courageous advance;
The world is great and belongs to you.
My child, after the last step
We shall be united again.

Questions and explanations:

1. Facts

Explanations of words, translation, construction of sentences, rhyme and rhythm of the poem, showing the contrast in the different verses.

Questions: Why is the first step of a child small? Where does the last step lead to? What distinguishes the first step from the last one? When will the child be able to walk alone? Why? What will the child discover and possess? How will the journey of life end?

2. Concepts

What does the poet understand by light and night? What does death mean to the poet? Why don't we get a sad impression of the poem? (It should be noted that Goes is a protestant pastor. To him death is not something to dread.) Why?

3. Values, faith

What are the different attitudes towards death between Christians and non-Christians? What differences exist in Christian beliefs concerning death, resurrection, immortality? What is the concept of Seventh-day Adventists? (The Adventist language teacher will take the opportunity to call attention to the Second Coming of Jesus, the hope of the resurrection and death as a "sleep".John 11:11-13;1 Cor.5:20)